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ABSTRACT

This paper compares and contrasts educational and gender experiences in Latin America and Africa. It provides a brief background for each area and addresses some commonly recognized issues, such as access to schooling and dropping out. The article discusses educational policies and examines some less-commonly recognized issues in higher education, literacy, and the gendered nature of the teaching force. It describes how education is a social equalizer, and it provides an overview of the state response to education. In contrasting Latin America and Africa, it shows how economic constraints, social exclusion, and the need to respond to global forces have shaped each area. It states that the longer history of nations in Latin America, as compared to Africa, has resulted in higher levels of educational attainment but has not resulted in a society more conscious of social and gender equity. Although education is perceived as important for employment, it is differentially possessed by the poor and the non-poor. Educational problems regarding gender exist in both regions, and access is far from sufficient to provide a transformative education. Although basic education is promoted for girls, social mobility in Latin America today is associated with a completed secondary and higher education. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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Policies and Practices on a Slippery Terrain: Lessons from Latin America and Africa in Educational Gender Equity

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Regional labels are abstractions. They hide a great diversity in country size, history, and levels of industrial development. There is little in common between Argentina and Haiti, between Costa Rica and Bolivia. The context and dynamics for democratization in South Africa are very different from those in Nigeria or Tanzania. Yet countries in close geographic proximity also share fundamental cultural and historical characteristics. Analytically it is advisable to search for common patterns among what seems at first sight a heterogeneous mix because comparisons provide mirrors and call into question major assumptions.

I. Background

In terms of modern history, Latin America has been independent since 1820, so it has been undergoing a process of nation-building for almost 180 years. Africa, in contrast, is much younger: about 37 years of independent life and thus a shorter time to construct its nation states [1]. In terms of public institutions, Latin America can be said to be five times older than Africa--an older sister you might call her.

Countries in both regions emerged from a colonial experience. In Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese influences have been replaced by U.S. influences. In Africa, the influence of the colonizer, be it England, France, or Portugal, is still strong. The colonial powers in Africa set up arbitrary countries out of multiple cultures; thus within countries there is great language differentiation, with over 1000 languages spoken in Africa. In Latin America, the colonizers also created artificial boundaries but the division of existing civilizations was less drastic. It was the Inca Empire that suffered the greatest fragmentation, but so much time has gone by that ethnic identities--although still present--are much less strong than in Africa.

Latin America is highly urbanized and has some of the largest cities in the world: Mexico (20 million), Sao Paulo (11 million), Rio de Janeiro (10 million). Many people in urban areas of the region might be poor but often they have ample access to basic technologies for everyday life: potable water, electricity, and sanitation. In Africa there are few large cities (notably Cairo and Lagos); most people live in rural areas. Rural residence is not bad in itself but it creates difficulties for educational provision and access.

Latin America is richer than Africa in terms of agricultural, mineral, and industrial resources, but it evinces the greatest income inequalities in the world. One third of its population earns less than $2 a day; thus the problem of social exclusion is quite serious in the region.

How do these two regions position themselves regarding gender? There is ample recognition that in precolonial times, African women had more access to land and thus to social status. But even

simultaneous nature of these forces and their strong intersection with other social markers such as social class, ethnicity, and race. With the assistance of feminist theory, we no longer see the educational system as a gender-neutral institution committed to the transmission of pure knowledge [2]. On the contrary, we realize well that every social struggle is played out in the field of education, which makes the content of what is taught and not taught and the lived experience of education critical to any effort of social transformation [3].

There are seven key policy concerns regarding gender. Three of these are often present in the official discourse, two others receive much less attention, and the last two are practically ignored in policy discourse and formulation.

Commonly Recognized Issues

1. Access to Schooling

Official statistics seriously underestimate the number of children out of school, particularly those in rural areas. Nonetheless, net and gross enrollment ratios are the most frequent indicators we have at national levels.

Access to schooling (in net enrollment ratios) exceeds 90 percent in most Latin American countries and there are very little gender difference in enrollments at all levels. Yet the educational expansion in Latin America has not reduced social inequalities but rather has mirrored those existing inequalities (Reimers and Uribe, 1999); the smallest gaps in social class are at the primary level but these gaps become greater in secondary enrollment rates and greater still in higher education enrollment. In Africa, access to primary schooling is still quite limited, with about a net enrollment rate of 60 percent for the region and a gender gap of 10 percent even at that level (UNICEF, 1999).

2. Repetition and Dropping Out

These two processes affect the poor the most and especially the rural poor. In regions with no or few technologies for everyday life (potable water, electricity, sewage), the participation of girls suffers a great deal. Such is the case in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, which evince high rates of repetition and dropout among girls.

Latin America has repetition rates among the highest in the world, with the average student completing four grades in about seven years of primary school (Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1995, p. 19) [5]. This repetition, however, does not evince serious gender disparities, except in rural areas among indigenous populations. Dropping out is highly associated with repetition. In Africa, for multiple reasons more girls than boys drop out of school, especially during adolescent years.

in those better times, there prevailed a sexual division of labor that made women community-bound, always in charge of cooking and childrearing. Cultural and religious beliefs of that region also made polygyny quite acceptable. In Latin America there was no polygyny but, on the other hand, a double standard of sexual conduct have characterized the region. In fact it was there that the term "machismo," which refers to exaggerated masculine norms, was coined. In short, there is no doubt that colonization--and the "civilization" that ensued--produced and maintained concepts such as private/public dichotomies, private property, men as head of household, men as public leaders, men as main income earners--social representations that seriously disadvantaged women.

The conditions of women in the world today are complex and varied. A powerful synthesis of the asymmetry that exists in men's and women's access to political and economic power, knowledge, and income is captured by the Gender Empowerment Measure developed by the United National Development Program. This index, which would reach 1.0 if women were at total parity with men, currently reaches at the most 0.63 in the case of the Nordic countries. In most developing countries, the index is well below 0.50, and Latin American countries on average do better than African countries by about 0.15 points (UNDP, 1995, pp. 84-85).

In these times of PowerPoint and other high-tech visual aids, I would like you to do something very simple. Please close your eyes for 10 seconds and think of the person I am calling "Martha." What image does Martha bring to you when she lives in Africa? What image does she bring when she inhabits Latin America? Keep those images in your mind and let us proceed with our examination.

II. Educational Policies and Gender

Policies are best defined as **proposed** solutions to **perceived** problems. Policies are intentions: between intention and actual practice there is a long, and often times, difficult path to traverse. Gender policies are those formulated by the state, usually in response to problems facing women as determined by the state, often resulting from some kind of social pressure.

The understanding of gender policies needs to be based on feminist theory. Through feminist analysis, we have today a greater understanding of gender in national development, of the positive and negative effects modernization--and now globalization--brings to women. We are cognizant of the subordinate role women have played in the industrialization process, an outgrowth of the sexual division of labor at home that has, on the one hand, ensured a double burden (i.e., work both inside and outside the home) and, on the other, limited the possibilities for access to better and less conventional jobs in the marketplace. We are now aware of the multiple political, cultural, and economic forces acting at microlevels and within institutions. We are aware also of the

3. Completion

Despite the almost universal enrollment and because of the high repetition rates in Latin America, completion rates for primary schooling are about the same for both regions despite the almost universal enrollment in Latin America. Thus, while 67 percent complete primary schooling in Africa, 74 percent do so in Latin America (UNICEF, 1999). A large difference between both regions, however, is the transition to secondary school. Because of a higher proportion of residence in urban areas and that fact that secondary schooling does not require fees, Latin America has a gross enrollment rate of 50 percent, in contrast with 25 percent in Africa. And due to differential domestic burdens and cultural practices regarding early marriage, Africa evinced a gender gap of at least 20 percent whereas a gender gap does not exist in Latin America (UNICEF, 1999).

What can explain the attention given by governments to issues such as access, repetition, and completion at primary levels of education over other issues? Several reasons are suggested: In the first place, these efforts do not require special measures by the state: girls are often expected to benefit merely as educational systems expand. Second, work on this level of education leaves untouched the content of the knowledge being provided by the schools. Third, giving women the basic level of education (the yardstick by which to judge universal access) is far from controversial because it prepares them to become more efficient mothers and household managers without exposing them to more critical and empowering forms of knowledge.

Less-Commonly Recognized Issues

1. Higher Education

In Latin America, university participation is as high as in many European countries, and in several countries more women than men can be found in the university. In Africa, there is a much smaller general participation in university, and gender gaps are quite severe.

While it could be argued that Latin American women have a strong superiority over African women in higher education, a common pattern resides in the concentration of women in fields of study that are held to be conventionally feminine, such as teaching, nursing, social sciences, and the humanities. Of course, field of study choices have consequences for jobs and jobs in these areas tend to be less rewarded than the male-dominated scientific and technological fields.

2. Literacy

Africa is characterized by low literacy rates and by serious disparities in men and women's attainment of reading and writing skills. For the African region as a whole the gender gap in

literacy reaches 22 percent; in the case of Latin America the gender gap is minuscule, at about 3 percent (UNESCO, 1995). But what these aggregated statistics for Latin America hide is the differential in literacy rate when indigenous populations or groups of African descent (particularly in Brazil) are considered. In those cases, women are much more disadvantaged than men are.

The above two policy areas receive relatively little attention. When discussions occur on gender higher education, they often center on enlarging the representation of women in science and technology rather than reshaping the distribution of women and men across fields of study as well (to increase the number of men in typically feminine fields, for instance). Literacy is attended through small projects and seldom considered part of a massive national project.

What explains the weak governments' attention to these two areas? Two reasons can be put forward: higher education involves potentially the most transformative and critical form of knowledge; from the state's perspective, it might be better to leave it undisturbed. Literacy for women, on the other hand, can also be transformative and thus worrisome. Moreover, it involves financial investments the state would prefer not to make given the perceived uncertainty of accruing the ultimate benefits of such an investment: satisfactory labor from rural or marginalized urban populations. Thus, a position of benign neglect would seem a rational choice from a political and economic perspective (although certainly not from an ethical perspective concerned with social justice).

Virtually Ignored Issues

1. The Lived Experience of Schooling

Very little progress has occurred in either Latin America or Africa in terms of attempting to modify the lived experience of schooling. There has been some research on sexual stereotypes in textbooks and some concomitant efforts to revise educational materials and provide gender-sensitive training to teachers. These efforts are a mere handful and usually supported through funding by international development agencies. We still need a greater understanding of schools as gendered institutions, and how they serve as training grounds for the emergence of gender asymmetries, ranging from peer behaviors to the assignment of one's "proper place" in society. Ample evidence coming from North America, Australia, and the UK indicate that schools account for much more social reproduction than contestation.

2. The Gendered Nature of the Teaching Force

A feature of formal K-9 educational systems is that over time their teaching labor force becomes feminized; such is the pattern in Europe, the United States, and Latin America--settings that have had long-standing massive public educational systems.

According to 1991 data, in Latin America at this point about 77 percent of the primary school teachers were women and about 47 percent of the secondary school teachers were also women. In Africa, because work in rural areas is seen as hazardous and because the teaching profession is still seen as well-paid occupation, men constitute the majority of teachers at all levels (63 and 71 percent, for primary and secondary school, respectively) (ILO, 1991, p. 116). The fact that women constitute or will constitute the majority of teachers could be used as a major avenue to produce changes in the social construction of gender via the schools.

If the state were to be genuinely committed to transformation in the social relations of gender, greater attention would be paid to the lived experience of schooling and efforts would be made to work with women teachers as change agents. Should it be surprising that this does not occur? Realistically, no. Why should the state be willing to transform structures that give it stability and support? Why should it try to move into a new social equilibrium that entails an element of risk and unknown?

III. Education as a Social Equalizer

The paradoxical nature of education is that it is widely accepted to be the great social equalizer despite the fact that educational systems in both Latin America and Africa are highly unequal and despite the fact that very few states adopt educational policies that address questions of equity and social justice.

Inequalities by social class are important; unquestionably children from poor families have fewer educational chances than children from non-poor families. Poverty creates further disadvantage for girls and women. Children of poor women do not go to preschool, so they can compete less with other children when they enter and progress through the regular educational system. For instance, in Brazil, only 25 percent in the 4-6 year age group enroll in pre-school but 70 percent of those who do are from the upper classes (Carvalho and Rocha, 1999). In both Africa and Latin America, middle and upper social class families increasingly send their children to private schools and do not see the need to defend public education [6]

Confronted with the serious situation of social exclusion and wealth inequalities, progressive forces in Latin America tend to concentrate on questions of social class and to ignore the gendered nature of schooling. With current efforts to make the region more competitive vis-a-vis the global market, attention is being focused on the quality of schooling. We certainly need more discussion of the consequences of social stratification of schools for the development of beneficial social and interpersonal skills of children.

IV. The State Response to Education

Let us return to our mental representation of Martha. For governments and most international agencies and, Martha is a young poor girl who needs access to schooling. Most solutions will concentrate on expanding access to basic education.

A major policy commitment to universal primary education took place in 1990, following the Education for All meeting of governments in Jomtien. This official commitment led, however, to few instances of actual increase or redeployment of resources to attain the goals of total access to basic education by the year 2000 as agreed upon by the attending governments. Today, there is talk among governments and international development agencies of deferring this goal for attainment to 2015. In 2015, some fear this goal might be postponed again.

In terms of gender in education, states have been responsive to various international agreements on the need to improve the status and condition of women. These agreements are very specific on the range of actions to adopt. While most governments have signed these global agreements, translating the agreements into national plans and concrete action has been quite a different story.

In Latin America today only four (out of possible 18) countries have adopted gender equity educational plans: Argentina and Bolivia represent the earliest efforts; it is interesting to observe that in both cases the personnel behind these national plans were not allowed to carry out their more comprehensive and transformative interventions. Resistance by either the Catholic Church or conservative bureaucrats emerged when actions were going to move from pilot to nationwide scale. The experience of Paraguay is very recent and it is too early to tell what might be allowed. The most successful case of gender equity policies and practices is the case of Uruguay--a small country with a strong democratic tradition and substantial participation of women in political action.

In African countries there have been no instances of gender equity national plans. While many international development agencies are involved there, most action takes place through localized projects and through interventions focused on increasing access rather than transforming content and experience. In two countries (Zimbabwe and Malawi), more innovative efforts are taking place, but again these are small-scale attempts. In South Africa, following the fall of the apartheid regime, the new government commissioned a study on gender and education. The committee that was appointed produced a very careful and rich report both on the conditions of women and education in South Africa and on the steps to be taken (Wolpe et al., 1997). The report called for the appointment of a director to lead the proposed Unit on Gender and Education within the Ministry of Education. A year and a half

later, no action had been taken on this report.

Africa is fortunate, however, to have a very powerful and resourceful nongovernmental organization (NGO) comprising women who are or have been in top decision making positions (e.g., ministers of education and vice-chancellors of universities). This NGO is the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). With funding from international developing agencies and foundations in the North, FAWE is supporting research and development on gender and education. Interesting studies about conditions of women as faculty members and as teachers, on classroom practices, and on women in science and technology are being conducted. It is hoped that such studies will influence policies to be made by African governments in the future, particularly as FAWE members have important political connections.

The curriculum in both Latin America and Africa is still highly centralized. This could be used as a way to design a comprehensive, age-graduated content. But, as noted earlier, limited attention is paid to gender. Most efforts concentrate on access to basic education and with the provision of more textbooks. And in the few instances in which textbooks become the object of transformation, the emphasis goes to using gender-neutral language (use of female pronouns and more presence of women characters in textbooks stories or illustrations). Gender-sensitive teacher training occurs in very few instances and is not part of ongoing nationwide teacher development efforts.

V. Promises and Challenges

In a scenario with few supportive characters, two actors loom large. One promises sociocultural change; the other may continue a work that is essentially reproductivist unless pressured to be different: the women's movement and international development agencies, respectively [7].

The women's movement carries out its work through women-led NGOs. These NGOs are valuable in developing stronger personal and collective identities among women. It is difficult work; they can influence only a few at a time because their programs serve small numbers of participants and are few in number. Yet, important learning goes on through women-led NGO programs. In Latin America a major network of women working on adult education, REPEM (Educational Network on Women's Education) monitors the implementation of international agreements implementation and prepares women to organize and mobilize. At this moment, there is no counterpart working on women's nonformal education in Africa, where the needs of adult women are even more substantial and urgent.

International donor agencies are becoming increasingly important players in these times of economic scarcity. Their objectives seek efficiency of school systems and production of

skills and attitudes that can be applied to economic system. Regarding gender, they have a narrow definition of what women need: basic education. This assumes that girls' increased access to basic education will make a difference. But in the economy of Latin America today, a person entering the labor force needs at least a high school education in order to obtain a job in the formal market. But, why do others propose basic education proposed for girls so often? At one level, it is the initial level and of course it must be attained before moving to higher levels. But the attention to this level means that concern is limited to transmitting knowledge that is just sufficient for women to become more effective mothers.

We need more research to understand these two actors. We need to understand more systematically the work of women-led NGOs: their range of attainments, failures, and strategies for sustained work. We need to understand more why donor agencies insist in considering governments their almost exclusive interlocutors in initiatives dealing with gender issues. More research of policy formation and implementation would help us understand who participates in donor/government negotiations and what makes gender agreements be ultimately considered or ignored.

The challenges are considerable. In this era of preference for market forces and current efforts to globalize the economy, the three main educational emphases these days are decentralization, privatization, and school effectiveness or quality. School effectiveness, especially in Latin America, is being defined as the mastery of the basic skills curriculum (reading and math) (Reimers and Uribe, 1999). The core curricula concentrate on basic skills for a competitive labor force and for the promotion of technological innovations. Thus, the public policy discourse often makes reference to basic literacy and numeracy, increased emphasis on the sciences, and to new approaches to vocational-technical schooling (Puryear, 1997). The efficiency movement offers limited space for notions of equity and social justice; this focus is clearly displacing any effort to attain equity and social justice and concomitant knowledge.

Accompanying the "minimal state" desired by globalization forces, educational decentralization has become the new mantra. Often decentralization is reduced to providing minimum financial resources to local communities. From a gender perspective, decentralization will not necessarily help women, since local communities can continue to be as culturally conservative as they have been in the past. While there is talk of the need to produce a "modern citizenry," such citizenry is really one that is better informed about the market needs than one that is trying to reduce exclusion in society.

Economic constraints do not permit recognition of teachers as professionals or improvement of their knowledge and financial status. In consequence, some of the most competent persons leave the teaching force to work elsewhere for greater pay.

Privatization, offered as a mechanism to improve the quality of schools by making them compete for customers, is operating mostly to alleviate the state's burden in education, rather than to foster alternative models for conceptualizing education. Not only in Africa and Latin America but in many parts of the world, public schools are in survival and defensive mode: trying to obtain reasonable state support while being attacked for not preparing the students for the global economy.

After years of total oblivion, education in Latin America is emerging as a major policy concern. The concern, however, is with effectiveness and a narrow definition of quality. By no means is quality being defined in term of developing civic understanding in youth and adults, not to mention understanding of inequities and inequalities in society. Under current circumstances, it must be said that the new educational policies emerging in Latin America are gender blind.

VI. Lessons from Latin America and Africa

The experience of the two regions, characterized as they have been by economic constraints, social exclusion, and the need to respond to global forces, holds some lessons for Asia and other regions.

1. The longer life as independent nations of Latin America has resulted in higher levels of educational attainment than in Africa but has not resulted in a society more conscious of social and gender equity.

2. Education is very important to obtain employment but it is differentially possessed by the poor and the non-poor; it has not been a good equally available and accessible to the population. Compensatory policies to enhance the educational success of poor students are needed, but it would be a mistake to define solutions only in terms of social class.

3. Educational problems regarding gender exist in both regions. Access alone is far from sufficient to provide a transformative education. By that criterion, there would be very little need to work on gender in Latin America. Content and lived experience are cornerstones of transformative education but both governments and international development agencies are reluctant to give those interventions full support.

4. Although basic education is promoted for girls, social mobility in Latin America today is associated with complete secondary and higher education. In Africa it might provide a few jobs in the formal sector of the economy, but it is a matter of time before basic education becomes devalued and higher levels preferred.

5. The work of women-led NGOs has been influential in

Notes

[1] In most of our discussion, Africa refers to Sub-Saharan Africa rather than the entire continent, which includes a distinct Arab culture in the northern part.

[2] For a more complete review of the main contributions of feminist theory to education, see Stromquist, in Schreiwer (ed.), forthcoming.

[3] For a synthesis pertaining gender and education in Latin America, see Stromquist, in Arnove and Torres (eds.), 1999.

[4] In Africa there has been a great increase in school enrollment, but 12 percent of primary school children will not be receiving any formal schooling in the near future. While there is still no universal primary information, UNESCO's enrollment predictions for the region have been surpassed, yet the proportion of those enrolled has been decreasing in some countries. According to several UNESCO sources, enrollment rates have decreased in 30 countries during the last 5 years; most of these countries are located in Africa.

[5] Repetition is not linked to quality alone (as some argue (Puryear, 1997, for instance), but it is linked also to a culture of failure. Brazil, for instance, has dropout rates for primary school of 63 percent (Carvalho and Rocha, 1999), with over 50 percent repeating first grade alone. One study comparing repetition rates produced by highly qualified teachers did not find differences from those produced by poorly prepared teachers. The damages to students' self-perception of this cultural practice have not been fully assessed.

[6] The educational system in Latin America is starkly divided, with private schools serving upper- and middle-classes, leaving public schools to be attended by the poor. In Africa, the tendency at the present time is for private schools to be rather low in prestige since most of them have emerged to meet the demand still not satisfied by the state.

[7] International development agencies are far from holding the same position regarding gender in development, and gender in education in particular. The point being made here is that those with the largest financial resources tend to be either conservative or meek in dealing with "partner" governments in developing countries.

affecting international agreements, which in turn have placed pressure on governments to recognize gender in development and the need to produce gender-sensitive action plans.

6. Women-led NGOs have not yet been able to exert power on the state for fuller implementation of educational commitments. As a result, in both Latin America and Africa there are sizable disjunctures between policy and practice. Policy often serves a symbolic purpose with limited translation into action at the local level and in schools.

7. Unless globalization forces are heavily contested, the current trend in Latin America is toward quality and efficiency rather than equity. A similar path seems likely for Africa.

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